

News roundup

GMC to consult on structural changes

The United Kingdom's General Medical Council is asking doctors and the public for their views on several options for changing its size and structure and increasing the number of lay members who participate in its work.

In a consultation document the GMC has set out several options, but the preferred one is for a small board of 15 to 25 members, with a medical majority and an elected medical president. Its work will be scrutinised by a larger conference of up to 200 members, split evenly between lay and medical members, with a lay chairman.

The document also asks for comments on a proposal to separate the two roles that the GMC now plays in judging a doctor's fitness to practise. At present, the GMC is seen as both prosecuting and sitting in judgment on doctors.

Linda Beecham *BMJ*

Comments are requested by 15 November. The document will be widely distributed and is on the GMC's website (www.gmc-uk.org).

Government asked to withdraw Griffiths report

The government came under strong pressure in the House of Lords last week to withdraw the report of an NHS Executive inquiry into paediatric research at North Staffordshire Hospital that drew scathing criticism in the *BMJ* last month.

In the *BMJ* Sir Iain Chalmers, an epidemiologist, and Edmund Hey, a retired paediatrician, had accused the inquiry panel, led by Professor Rod Griffiths, of numerous errors in its report on a trial led by Professor David Southall (23 September, p 752). In the Lords, Lord Walton, a former BMA and GMC president, asked health minister Lord Hunt to withdraw those parts of the report.



Professor David Southall

He was joined by Lord Winston (the infertility specialist Robert Winston), who said: "I also believe there are so many flaws in the report that it must be reviewed by the government." Lord Hunt said that the government agreed with the recommendations on research governance and intended to implement them.

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

Fears over anthrax vaccination driving away US reservists

A compulsory anthrax vaccination programme, begun in 1997 for all 2.4 million US active duty and reserve troops, is leading to resignations of thousands of US reservists.

Although the vaccine has been used for 29 years, widespread fears of its possible long term adverse health effects have resulted in a quarter of 176 000 pilots and aircrew in the US air force reserve or national guard leaving their jobs or requesting reassignment. Assurances of its safety by the Pentagon and comprehensive monitoring of the service members receiving the vaccine have failed to staunch the flow.

The House Committee on Government Reform issued a report critical of the programme in February, and this month the

General Accounting Office, the investigatory arm of Congress, also criticised it.

Fred Charatan *Florida*

NICE's appraisal procedures attacked

The process used by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) to evaluate drugs in England and Wales has been hit with a barrage of criticism on the eve of its decision on interferon beta as a treatment for multiple sclerosis.

The institute has been accused of being uncooperative, uncommunicative, and biased towards health economic data. In addition, some critics say that it treats patients, their support groups, and pharmaceutical companies with disdain.

The Multiple Sclerosis Society has attacked NICE for acting unfairly in planning to ban interferon beta from the NHS and is supported in its plea to make the drug freely available to suitable patients by six other organisations, including the Association of British Neurologists and the Royal College of Nursing.

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

WHO holds hearings on tobacco control

The World Health Organization (WHO) last week conducted two days of public hearings on the proposed global tobacco treaty known as the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

Representatives of 160 organisations, including public health agencies, community organisations, academic institutions, and tobacco companies, gave verbal evidence.

Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, the WHO's director general, said: "It appears that tobacco companies will continue to oppose measures that effectively reduce the number of new smokers and current smokers."

Tudor Toma *London*

Obesity surgery grows in popularity in the US

Surgery for obesity is becoming increasingly popular in the United States, with the number of operations growing from 20 000 five years ago to 40 000 this year.

Gastric restrictive procedures such as gastric bypass or gastric banding are now being offered as a cure for the nearly 18% of Americans with a body mass index ($\text{weight(kg)/height(m)}^2$) of at least 30.



Can big be beautiful?

In a 1991 report the National Institutes of Health concluded that surgery was a reasonable solution for some people and said, "a major drawback to the nonsurgical approach is failure to maintain reduced body weight in most patients."

Some insurers are beginning to pay for the operation, which costs about \$20 000 (£14 200), recognising the lifetime cost savings in treatment of associated morbidity—such as diabetes, hypertension, gout, arthritis, and hypercholesterolaemia.

Fred Charatan *Florida*